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Paradigm of Tragic-Heroism in Shakespearean Plays in the Light of Aristotelian Principle

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Abstract:

This paper takes into account the establishment and the constant rise of the tragic-heroic persona in William Shakespeare's writings. It also incorporates the profile, attributes and impression of a tragic-hero.

One of the greatest challenges that Shakespeare's plays present is his paradigm to center the narratives around awkward central characters, and he has composed many tragedies like this. Tragic heroes are the keystone for formulating tragedies. The idea of the tragic hero was first proposed by Aristotle, a Greek philosopher.

In this research paper, a study has been initiated on the tragic-heroic character in the plays written by William Shakespeare with a pinch of the Aristotelian concept of tragic-hero. Along with that, this paper attempts to re-read the definition and characteristics of Aristotle's tragic hero. Thus, the paper studies the tragic-heroic paradigm in Shakespeare's plays in the light of Aristotle's "poetics" through the characters of Othello, Macbeth, King Lear and Hamlet.

Keywords: tragic-heroic character, William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, King Lear, hamartia, tragic end.

Introduction

The birth and even the meaning of the term tragic hero was first coined by the Greek philosopher Aristotle in his greatest work "poetics". According to Aristotle, a perfect tragedy aims at arousing the feeling of pity and fear in the audience. Aristotle in his "poetics" Defines the characteristics and definition of tragedy and its tragic hero, even every pin sized object is covered in the "poetics". According to Aristotle, a greatest tragic

hero should be, in the first place, a man of eminence. The actions of a distinct man would be 'serious, complete and of a certain magnitude', as required by Aristotle. Additionally, the hero should not only be eminent but also basically a good man, though not absolutely righteous.

The misery, downfall and demise of an absolutely virtuous man would generate feelings of revulsion rather than those of 'terror and compassion' which a tragic play must produce. The hero should neither be an evil nor an immoral person for his downfall, otherwise his demise would please and satisfy our moral sense and hence there wouldn't be the feelings of pity, compassion and fear. Therefore, the perfect tragic hero should be basically a good man with a minor hamartia in his character. The entire tragedy should concern from this tragic flaw or error of judgment. The fall over and misery and demise of such a hero would certainly generate feelings of pity and fear.

Aristotle comments, "There remains for our choice a person neither eminently virtuous nor just, nor yet involved in misfortune by deliberate vice or villainy, but by some error or human frailty; And this person should also be someone of high-fame and flourishing prosperity." Such a hero would form an ideal tragic hero and hence form an perfect tragedy.

In Aristotle's view, a tragic hero must possess following qualities:

- Hero should be of mixed character, i.e. good as well as bad,
- Possess flaws in his character,
- Must fall from heights of prosperity and glory,
- He should be a man of ordinary weakness that audiences can relate themselves with them,
- Presence of hamartia,
- Realization of his mistakes,
- Falling of hero must arouse feelings of pity and fear.
- Peripeteia, anagnorisis and pathos.

According to Aristotle, a strong plot should be able to stick on three basic elements: Peripeteia, anagnorisis and pathos. Peripeteia can be described as a sudden reversal of

fortune in circumstances, i.e. from the heights of glory to extreme downfall. Anagnorisis or recognition is a sudden discovery made by the hero about another character's true identity or the true nature of their own circumstances. Pathos are the major grief of the tragic hero and are related to the awakening of pity or fear in the spectator.

Every tragic hero is based on its tragic story and every tragic story possesses distinct characters. This research paper takes into account the characters of Shakespearean plays like Othello, Macbeth, King Lear and Hamlet, to study the paradigm of Shakespeare's tragic-heroic figure. And with the characterization of Aristotelian tragic-hero, it would be easy to analyse how these characters fit in its description.

Othello as a Tragic-hero

Shakespeare's play, "Othello", represents a classic tragedy. Aristotle gave the classic tragedy a discernible definition:

"A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions." (Aristotle 1).

Many of these qualities can be discovered in Othello, considering it as a successful representation of Aristotle's influence on literature. Thus, by analysing Aristotle's pattern of the classic tragedy, one can observe the artistic qualities of Othello, which brings out a crystal clear understanding of the tragic hero.

The beginning of the play proceeds with the main character and the protagonist Othello, an African general of the Venice army; and in the beginning itself, Othello marries his beloved, Desdemona. Throughout the play, Iago, who works under Othello, keeps on conspiring against him. In other words, Iago is destined to destroy Othello and his married life, hence can be called as the antagonist of the play. No one succeeds in this play except the antagonist.

As stated in Aristotle's words, the story remains "serious", there is no act or scene considering the love and romance shared between Othello and Desdemona. Neither any sign of comedy nor history occupies any place. As a result, the play is a complete tragedy which is followed by the satisfaction of antagonist's evil intention. In the last act, Othello learnt about Iago's malicious character, i.e. recognition of the true identity of another character by the protagonist or main character, which is termed as anagnorisis. In this scene the audience discovers that Othello feels jealous and initially acts in rage as he attempts to harm Iago, then he weeps with pain from killing his beloved innocent wife. He then kills himself from guilt and grief. This stress, which is generated from the last act gives the play the "moving magnitude" and the "arousing of pity and fear" that Aristotle mentions in the definition of "tragedy". At the end, Othello criticizes his terrible act and clears Desdemona from all wrongs, rediscover his love, though she cannot be returned to him, and finally punishes his own deed.

Othello further stands on Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero. Othello represents the main character of the play and is followed by some fatal flaws within him. His main flaw is his deception by Iago and jealousy. His other flaws may include insecurity and poor judgement. Through the play it can be easily understood that Othello can be manipulated easily, the advantage of this weakness is taken by Iago. And the murder of his own wife was the greatest miscalculation made by Othello. Thus Othello was jealous and guilty for his acts. His biggest mistake was believing his enemy as a well-wisher and gave importance to his pride when he kills Desdemona. This characteristic is called as 'hamartia' by Aristotle.

Othello fits perfectly as per the principles laid by Aristotle. "Othello" perfectly generates the feelings of pity and fear, catharsis, hero possesses a noble birth, hero possesses good as well as bad qualities, this tragedy contains proper imitation of action, play moves in a serious direction, hero contains hamartia on which the tragedy is followed, proper peripeteia and anagnorisis has taken place. Thus, Othello follows the principles of a tragic hero laid by Aristotle.

Macbeth as a tragic hero

In Shakespeare's play "Macbeth", the protagonist of the story, Macbeth, would be best described as a 'tragic hero'. Macbeth displays many traits that embody the archetype of what defines a classic tragic hero. This idea of a tragic hero is illustrated throughout the play in how Macbeth possesses many heroic qualities, has flaws that lead to his eventual tragic fall from grace, and in how the reader develops sympathy for this tragedy. Like many classic tragic heroes, Macbeth begins as 'heroic' character that the audience can admire, but his blindness to his flaws lead to his eventual fall and demise. Macbeth is described as being an incredibly wise man of stature that has risen to great heights in life.

Macbeth, a Scottish general who was appointed as 'thane of Glamis' as a reward for his bravery and loyalty. He was a brave soldier and a powerful man. He was a valiant fighter who had protected his country of Scotland well, but laterally he desired to become a king. His ambitions appear initially overly prideful, and are also shown as very grand. Therefore, these ambitions illustrate Macbeth as someone who is heroic and admirable in character.

In the drama, the character of Macbeth is compatible with Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero. Aristotle's tragic hero is a man who is characterized by good as well as evil. He is a combination of good as well as bad qualities. The three witches supply the activating circumstances necessary for the discovery of peripeteia, i.e. reversal, by disclosing the fate or future of Macbeth. In other words, they are destined to lead Macbeth to his eventual destruction. One fatal flaw of Macbeth was his weakness of getting manipulated easily. His downfall starts with his deception by his wife, Lady Macbeth. Macbeth's quality of loyalty and performing noble deeds, soon become questionable, as he plans to murder his honourable King and performed the same. The deception by Lady Macbeth and the three witches took him in the way of being disloyal, a traitor and a murderer. By doing so, he falls from the heights of prosperity and glory to his demise.

The main hamartia of Macbeth was his vaulting ambition, as well as moral weakness and selective perception, which eventually contributed to his demise. Macbeth's ambition to become king leads him to follow the murder of his honourable king, with the help of his wife Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth craves for power even more than the

protagonist Macbeth. Macbeth's hamartia is his unjustifiable ambition which leads him to deliberately hold the path of evil. Macbeth's tragic flaw is the desire for power and position, that is to be king, which is more significant to him than anything else in the world. He is willing to give up everything that he has in his life in order to acquire the throne. He kills King Duncan, then Banquo and later on the wife and the son of Macduff in order to secure the throne for himself as well as for his future generation.

According to Aristotle, an ideal tragic hero should be, firstly, a man of eminence that is, his actions should be serious and of a certain magnitude. In the play, "Macbeth", there is no mention of love, romance or comedy. The play basically walks on a serious note. Further, Macbeth is a man with good as well as bad qualities. He is not absolutely virtuous not totally evil, that perfectly fits for the characteristic of a tragic hero by Aristotle. Macbeth's other major hamartia is shown in his blindness to the truth and his vain nature. While the Macbeth's journey does cause sympathy from the audience, it's also true that Macbeth's downfall invokes a degree of terror as well. The downfall of Macbeth is not a pure loss. There is some increase in awareness and some gain in self-knowledge and some discovery on the part of the tragic hero by the spectators as prescribed by Aristotle that 'catharsis is pleasurable as it invokes learning'.

King Lear as a tragic hero

Shakespeare's character of King Lear is also an ideal example of Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero. According to Aristotle's definition of tragedy and its characteristics, the tragic hero should be of high birth, so that his fall will be more effective, generates more pity and fear on the part of the spectators. King Lear, in the first place, was the man of eminence and a nobleman. In the beginning, king Lear possesses all the respect and honour and privilege of an aristocrat. He decided to relinquish and to distribute everything among his three daughters on the condition: whoever loves him the most, will get the most part of the wealth. His two older daughters, Goneril and Regan performed everything they could, to prove their love towards the father. The youngest one, Cordelia, just confessed her love simply by stating that, her love for her father is exactly same as it should be, i.e. the amount of love exist between a father and a daughter. Cordelia's response disappointed the king and as a result, he banished his youngest daughter. The most loyal

servant, Kent, then tries to enlighten him with the truth that his youngest daughter Cordelia loves him the most. As a result of which, Kent also gets deprived of his job. This point is the point of peripeteia in the play where King Lear's turning point begins. This reversal of destiny makes him suffer the most.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that King Lear's tragic flaw is his wilful pride and lack of personal insight i.e. blindness and poor judgement. This excessive pride and self-confidence leads him to his suffering. He has suffered till his demise just because of his hamartia i.e. poor judgement. Lear's older daughters Goneril and Regan, never loved their father, neither they cared for him. They only desired the wealth of their father and later when their turn comes to take care of King Lear, they simply backed off. At the end of the play, it was her youngest daughter, Cordelia, who came for her father's life and tried to prevent Lear till her last breath. King Lear realised his mistake that is his hamartia of poor judgement. All this is followed by his greatest pathos, that breaks him down.

The gratification of King Lear and his love of flattery destined him to give his wealth and power to his daughters based purely on how perfectly they would flatter Lear with their words. As a result, Goneril and Regan treat him terribly, snatches Lear's knights from him and lock up his servant in the stocks. After this incident, King Lear seems to realize his greatest mistake and ran away in a dreadful storm. Here King Lear experiences a huge grief and losses his consciousness of mind. This was the point of anagnorisis in the play where Lear discovers the true identity of his daughters. In the end, Cordelia dies and King Lear feels helpless and experience his greatest grief and falls towards his demise. The audience feels pity and fear as they watch that Lear even didn't get a chance to rectify his deeds.

Thus, king Lear involves all the characteristics to stand on Aristotle's definition of tragic hero. King Lear's hamartia of love of flattery, quality of hubris, anger and most importantly, his misjudgement leads him to his downfall and demise. His hamartia not only leads to his demise, but death of several others, including his beloved daughter Cordelia and his most loyal servant Kent. At the end of the play, he shows self realization, humanity and humility. Hence the spectators are left with catharsis and a feeling of pity and fear.

Hamlet as a tragic hero

In literature, there are countless tragic hero. Tragic heroism is an exceptional quality of authors to represent it in the characters, this makes tragic heroism so unique and fascinating. By Aristotle, tragic hero is defined as a hero who is able to generate catharsis, a feeling of pity and fear, possess hamartia, have a noble or sometimes royal birth, possess both good as well as bad qualities, the downfall of hero, peripeteia (the point of reversal), anagnorisis (point of recognition of true identity), pathos (greatest grief of hero's life) and ultimately his tragic demise.

“Hamlet” is the longest written work of Shakespeare. In Shakespeare's “hamlet”, the main character Hamlet is successfully considered a tragic hero. Hamlet draws sympathy as he loses his father and draws admiration as he vows to avenge his father's murder. The murder of his father is stated as the turning point of Hamlet's life i.e. peripeteia. Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, is portrayed as a very emotional soul and a brave warrior with a bad and violent temper. Hamlet's one fatal flaw is his low temper and emotional soul. The grief of his father's demise leads him to the conflict between his duties, i.e. conflict between his duty towards his father and his duty towards his throne and countrymen.

According to Aristotle, tragedy is “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude”. In “Hamlet”, there is an imitation of actions as whatever happens in the play is a carbon copy of our lives. The act of murder of the king of Denmark, is a very serious action and also the whole play is moving into a serious mode. There is no comedy in the play nor much love and romantic scenes. It is a complete play and tightly connected in the sense that all the loose ends are tied together in a sensible and believable manner. Thus, it stands on Aristotle's definition perfectly.

According to Aristotle, an ideal tragedy involves a perfect amount of pity and fear. In “Hamlet”, Prince Hamlet experiences such a misfortune which he has not earned and also not deserved. King's demise causes him great pity, moreover, his mother marries his uncle Claudius whom he suspects in the murder of the king and is responsible for the tragedy. We pity Hamlet because we feel sympathy for him for his suffering and we fear because his demise and tragedy could be ours someday.

The hamlet's major flaw is his inability to act which is the main cause of his demise. Hamlet is shown as a very confused man who is very much able to plan his journey, but falls short of fulfilling them and as a result, he keeps on procrastinating his decisions and acts. He many times decided to murder Claudius and has formulated many plans, but most of the time fails to perform. At the end of the play, it is clear that the inability to act causes Hamlet great loss of his life as well as the life of his mother. In the ending act Hamlet plays a duel with Laertes, there also Hamlet is only reacting to the actions performed by Laertes. If Hamlet has performed his acts on time, then his procrastination wouldn't have been seen as a flaw.

According to Aristotle, Hamlet's plot is considered as complex. The anagnorisis has taken place when prince Hamlet ordered to play the play in the castle. The disquiet and unease of King Claudius helps Hamlet to discover everyone's character's true identity. At that point when Claudius leaves the play in between and went to church, Hamlet thinks of stabbing him but again his hamartia comes in between. According to Hamlet, if he stabs Claudius while praying then he will be sent to heaven so he drops the plan. Thus, Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is a great and effective tragedy which follows most of the concepts laid by Aristotle in his "poetics".

Conclusion

Thus, Shakespeare's purpose of inserting such drastically different and wonderful characters is to generate a sense of excitement in the drama. The plays of Shakespeare are familiar with western culture of the Elizabethan age. All the four plays and their tragic heroes are well penned by Shakespeare. The four plays are also written in a chronological starting with "Hamlet" in 1599-1601, "Othello" in 1603, "King Lear" in 1605-1606 and finally "Macbeth" in 1606. There are some common characteristics in the four tragic heroes considered in this paper. In the first place, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth, all of them possess some tragic flaws, these are, procrastination, jealousy, love of flattery and vaulting ambitions respectively and there are other flaws also as mentioned above in their respective columns. But the one of the common hamartia possessed by each character is their 'poor judgement' and 'inability in making decision and executing them. Hamlet,

Othello, King Lear and Macbeth, all of them suffers with poor judgement and we also discover that they faced problems in the execution of their decision.

Shakespeare also inserted some common points in his characters. All the four characters belong to high noble position either as kings or Prince or some other higher and respected authority under kings. All of them destined to their demise due to their hamartia and hence we finds them unable to get a second chance and correct their mistakes. Shakespeare has represented these characters very uniquely in their own place with maintaining a paradigm of some common characteristics within his plays and their stories. Shakespeare has composed his plays using blank verse mostly. Shakespeare considers Aristotle's Poetics as the thumb rule for a well-written tragedy. Thus, Shakespeare's play involves Aristotle's prescribed principles on tragedy and their tragic hero.

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